

# Cultural Diplomacy in Global Governance: Reimagining Indonesia's Soft Power Through Nahdlatul Ulama's Islam Nusantara Paradigm

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)'s deployment of Islam Nusantara as cultural soft power to counter global Islamophobia. Through case studies of NU's diaspora networks (PCINU) in Japan and Australia—using interviews, discourse analysis, and policy documents—the research reveals cultural diplomacy strategies: *haul* (commemorative rituals), *shalawatan* (devotional chants), interfaith education, and cross-cultural dialogues. These promote moderate Islam rooted in local traditions, contrasting state-centric models (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Iran). Challenges include intra-Muslim fragmentation and Salafi-Wahhabi-driven digital radicalization, yet NU fosters global perceptions of Islam as adaptive and peaceful. The study urges integrating NU's grassroots efforts into Indonesia's foreign policy while enhancing multilingual digital counter-radicalization outreach. Theoretically, it redefines soft power by shifting discourse to position civil society as diplomatic agents, demonstrating how religious-cultural movements reshape transnational narratives of Islamic moderation. NU's model elevates Indonesia's global image as an inclusive Islamic hub, though sustained impact requires institutional collaboration, resource mobilization, and strategic communication.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has witnessed a paradigmatic shift in international relations theory and practice, with cultural diplomacy emerging as a critical mechanism for geopolitical influence (Hoesterey, 2020). As traditional determinants of state power—military hegemony and economic dominance—increasingly fail to unilaterally shape global hierarchies, the normative framework of soft power (Nye, 20019) has redefined diplomatic engagement. This conceptual evolution, as Dorigné-Thomson (2023) elucidates, positions cultural capital—encompassing value systems, heritage, and identity constructs—as central to transnational attraction and legitimacy-building. Developing nations, particularly those marginalized in conventional power structures, now strategically leverage cultural assets to navigate geopolitical fragmentation and identity polarization, fostering cross-civilizational dialogue while asserting agency in multipolar systems.

Within this milieu, Indonesia's socio-political profile presents a compelling case study. As the world's third-largest democracy and most populous Muslim-majority nation, Indonesia embodies a unique synthesis of Islamic orthodoxy, pluralistic governance, and localized cultural praxis (Nubowo, 2023). Its diplomatic narrative transcends mere multiculturalism, offering an epistemological framework where Islamic principles harmonize with indigenous traditions—a counter-narrative to both Islamophobic discourses and radicalized interpretations of global Islam. This syncretic amalgamation positions Indonesia not merely as a passive participant but as an architect of alternative soft power models.

Central to this discourse is *Islam Nusantara* (Archipelagic Islam), a hermeneutical paradigm advanced by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's preeminent Islamic organization with 90 million constituents. Grounded in the tripartite principles of *rahmah* (compassion), *ukhuwah* (fraternity), and *wathaniyah* (civic nationalism), this school reconfigures Islamic epistemology through localized socio-historical lenses (Baso, 2016). Unlike essentialist interpretations, *Islam Nusantara* operationalizes cultural diplomacy via a dynamic dialectic: preserving theological rigor while embracing pluralism as a civilizational imperative. Its praxis—rooted in interfaith collaboration and adaptive cultural integration—challenges monolithic representations of Islam, offering a replicable model for conflict mediation and soft power projection in pluralistic societies.

The operationalization of *Islam Nusantara* as a hermeneutic framework for soft diplomacy is exemplified by Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) transnational institutional apparatus. Through its global networks, notably PCINU (Nahdlatul Ulama International Branch Management), NU has systematically institutionalized cultural diplomacy via three interlocking modalities: intercultural peace forums, interreligious symposia, and decolonial educational initiatives (Folandra, 2023). These programs transcend conventional faith-based outreach, instead functioning as epistemic communities that reframe Islamic discourse through the prism of *tasamuh* (tolerance) and *tawazun* (balance)—core tenets of Indonesia's Islamic modernity. Such praxis not only repositions NU as a non-Western epistemic authority in global religious governance but also reconfigures cultural diplomacy as a performative act of knowledge co-production.

A watershed moment in this trajectory emerged during Indonesia's 2022 G20 presidency, when NU spearheaded the Religion of Twenty (R20) initiative—a civil society counterpoint to state-centric diplomatic forums. By convening 450 religious leaders from 43 nations, the R20 disrupted hegemonic narratives of civilizational clash, instead operationalizing *Islam Nusantara*'s

principles as a normative framework for interfaith conflict resolution (Sofanudin, 2022). This initiative exemplifies what Ginting (2023) terms “diplomacy of theological pluralism,” wherein Indonesian Islamic moderation is projected not as a passive alternative to extremism but as an active epistemology for global peacebuilding. Crucially, the R20’s emphasis on *rahmatan lil-‘alamin* (universal benevolence) reframes religious diplomacy from a tool of soft power accumulation to a mechanism for redefining transnational moral geographies.

Despite these innovations, critical scholarship reveals structural dissonance between NU’s grassroots diplomatic efficacy and Indonesia’s formal foreign policy architecture. Dorigné-Thomson (2023) policy analysis identifies a paradoxical dynamic: while the state tacitly incentivizes NU’s cultural diplomacy in the Global South—particularly in Africa and South Asia—it fails to systematize *Islam Nusantara* within its strategic documents or multilateral engagements. This institutional ambivalence perpetuates what Nubowo (2023) conceptualizes as “diplomatic hybridity,” wherein non-state actors compensate for state-level conceptual inertia through parallel diplomacy networks. The resultant lacuna—between Indonesia’s cultural capital and its under-theorized foreign policy paradigms—underscores an urgent need for scholarly interrogation of how postcolonial states might institutionalize indigeneous soft power models without compromising their authenticity.

This institutional lacuna engenders critical vulnerabilities in the sustainability matrix of *Islam Nusantara* diplomacy. The current paradigm’s reliance on ad-hoc civil society initiatives—despite their demonstrable efficacy in micro-contexts—risks epistemic fragility, as grassroots diplomacy remains contingent upon fluctuating institutional priorities and individual actor commitments (Dorigné-Thomson, 2023). Field observations reveal this paradox: while NU’s international branches (PCINU) in Japan, China, Australia, and the Netherlands demonstrate remarkable success in vernacularizing Islamic principles through educational outreach and socio-religious engagement (Indraning, 2020), their impact remains constrained by the absence of a cohesive state-backed framework. For instance, PCINU Japan’s cultural mediation—praised for presenting Islam as a “cool” (*keren*), contextually adaptive faith—exemplifies the hermeneutic flexibility of *Islam Nusantara* in bridging Islamic orthopraxy with host-nation cultural sensibilities. Yet, such case-specific triumphs underscore a broader theoretical imperative: the need to systematically analyze how diasporic actors translate, negotiate, and re-embed indigenous religious values within heterodox cultural ecosystems.

Scholarly engagement with these phenomena remains disproportionately skewed toward state-centric analyses of Indonesian foreign policy, privileging traditional security paradigms over the emergent spiritual-cultural dialectics (Nubowo, 2023). The dominant corpus fixates on bilateral trade metrics or geopolitical alignments, while relegating cultural diplomacy—particularly its Islamic epistemic dimensions—to peripheral academic curiosity. Even within niche studies, methodological nationalism persists, with researchers privileging normative frameworks (e.g., “moderate Islam” binaries) over granular examinations of lived experience among NU’s cultural ambassadors. This epistemological myopia obscures the phenomenological dimensions of faith-based diplomacy—how actors cognitively map *Islam Nusantara*’s principles onto pluralistic social terrains, or how host communities semiotically reconstruct these principles within localized moral imaginaries.

It is within this interdisciplinary chasm that our study stakes its scholarly intervention. By adopting a critical cosmopolitan lens, we interrogate three underexplored vectors: (1) The

semiotic negotiation of *Islam Nusantara*'s core tenets (e.g., *rahmatan lil-'alamin*) in cross-cultural communication, particularly how NU diplomats operationalize these as transcultural ethical anchors; (2) The cognitive frameworks through which international audiences decode *Islam Nusantara*, examining whether its reception aligns with Indonesia's projected "moderate Islam" narrative or generates hybridized third-space interpretations; (3) The praxis-based knowledge systems emerging from NU's transnational networks, analyzing how field-level improvisations (e.g., interfaith coding of Islamic rituals) inform theory-building in post-Westphalian cultural diplomacy.

This tripartite investigation moves beyond descriptive accounts of NU's activities, instead positioning *Islam Nusantara* diplomacy as a contested site of meaning-making—where theological principles, cultural hybridity, and diplomatic agency coalesce to redefine Islam's global epistemic cartography. By centering actor narratives and audience receptivity, the study bridges critical gaps in International Relations (IR) theory, Islamic studies, and intercultural communication scholarship, while offering empirical grounding for policymakers to reimagine faith-state synergies in 21st-century diplomacy.

This study constitutes a critical intervention at the intersection of faith-based civil society movements and post-Westphalian cultural diplomacy paradigms. By interrogating Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) transnational praxis through a tripartite analytical framework—semiotic construction of *Islam Nusantara*, operationalization through PCINU networks, and global receptivity dynamics—it addresses a lacuna in both Islamic studies and International Relations (IR) scholarship. The research transcends conventional state-centric analyses, instead positioning NU as an epistemic community that reconfigures soft power through theological-civilizational synthesis (Acharya, 2021). Socially, it illuminates how non-state actors recalibrate diplomatic agency in an era of polycentric global governance, offering empirical evidence of civil society's capacity to co-construct national identity narratives beyond formal state apparatuses. Culturally, it challenges Huntingtonian civilizational clash theses by demonstrating how *Islam Nusantara*'s hermeneutic framework transforms religious capital into a conflict mediation tool, thereby reconstituting faith as an architecture of cosmopolitan peacebuilding.

Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for multiple stakeholders: For Indonesian policymakers, they reveal strategic pathways to institutionalize *Islam Nusantara* within multilateral cultural agreements without compromising NU's grassroots legitimacy. For interfaith organizations, they model replicable frameworks for transforming theological principles into intercultural dialogue mechanisms. For Islamic educational institutions, they offer empirical validation of contextually adaptive *dakwah* (proselytization) methodologies in pluralistic societies. Ultimately, this research underscores the urgency of reconceptualizing cultural diplomacy beyond neoliberal soft power metrics, advocating instead for an ontological shift that recognizes spiritual capital as constitutive of 21st-century geopolitical influence architectures.

## 2. METHODS

A descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method is applied as the main strategy in this study. The choice of this approach is based on the main objective to explore in depth the practice of Islamic Archipelago cultural diplomacy carried out by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) through the active role of its overseas branch, namely the Special Branch of Nahdlatul Ulama (PCINU). The case study strategy is considered the most relevant because it provides space for a contextual

and holistic understanding of how local cultural values are translated into a form of soft power diplomacy on the global stage (Yin, 2017).

Descriptive qualitative research prioritizes the understanding of human meaning and experience in a particular social context. In this case, the research focuses on NU's role as a non-state diplomacy actor and how Islam Nusantara is practiced as a living narrative in diplomatic and cross-cultural activities. This research also tried to see the symbolic representation and communication dynamics that accompany Islamic diplomacy activities at the grassroots level and NU diaspora networks (Hamzah, 2020).

The geographical focus is on PCINU activities in two countries, Japan and Australia. The selection of these case study locations is based on the intensity of cultural diplomacy activities conducted by NU in these two countries over the past five years. Japan represents the context of a homogeneous and majority non-Muslim society, while Australia presents a complex and plural multicultural context. The research was conducted from August 2023 to February 2024, with a combination of field visits, online correspondence, and in-depth literature review of primary and secondary sources.

Participants included active PCINU administrators, cultural diplomats, international relations observers, and academics who have direct involvement or in-depth knowledge of the relationship between Islam Nusantara and Indonesian public diplomacy. The purposive sampling technique was used to select key informants who met certain criteria, such as more than two years of experience in foreign diplomacy programmes, direct involvement in PCINU activities, and strategic positions in intercultural relations. The snowball sampling technique was used to capture additional informants on the recommendation of the main informants.

Data collection techniques were triangulated through semi-structured interviews, non-participatory observation and documentation studies. Interviews were conducted online and offline, with open-ended questions that allowed in-depth exploration of informants' experiences, perceptions, and personal reflections related to Islam Nusantara-based diplomatic activities. Observations were made of cultural campaign materials, documentation of PCINU activities, and social media broadcasts featuring symbols of Indonesian Islamic diplomacy abroad.

In addition, official documents such as the White Book on Public Diplomacy published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, transcripts of the Religion of Twenty (R20) forum, and archives of PCINU activities were analyzed. This document collection acts as a source of data triangulation as well as material to explore the representation of religious and cultural diplomacy discourses promoted by the state and NU.

To ensure data validity, source and method triangulation techniques were used, comparing and crosschecking information from interviews, documentation and observation. In addition, member checking was conducted, where the researcher sent a summary of the interview results to the informant to be reconfirmed and refined if needed. The documentation process was kept in the form of an audit trail, which is a detailed record of all processes, from data collection to analysis, in order to maintain transparency and traceability of the research process (Tracy, 2024).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques that refer to the Miles and Huberman interactive model. This process included three main stages: data reduction, data presentation and conclusion drawing. The data reduction process involved open coding of interview transcripts and documents, followed by clustering of themes based on key indicators



such as moderate Islamic narratives, culture-based diplomacy, counter-extremism, and the influence of cultural globalization (Hashimov, 2015).

The researcher used colour-based manual coding tools and symbolic categories to mark the occurrence of narrative patterns in interviews and documents. The themes found were grouped and verified with other data to produce a full understanding of the events or diplomacy processes that occurred in the field. Each theme was ensured to have empirical support through direct quotes or documentary evidence.

Given the dimensions of discourse and representation in NU's diplomatic practices, this study also utilizes Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach. This analysis focuses attention on how power, ideology, and identity construction are built through language in official documents and public statements from NU and the state. This approach is relevant for reading the implied meaning of religious diplomacy language used in international forums.

Critical discourse analysis was conducted by identifying keywords, metaphors, and narrative frameworks used in various media of NU communication and Indonesian public diplomacy. This includes speech texts, press releases, social media content, and global religious forums such as R20. By doing so, researchers can understand the relationship between text (language), context (culture and politics), and praxis (diplomatic action).

This methodological design is expected to present a comprehensive, contextual and reflective picture of the practice of Nusantara Islamic diplomacy in the context of globalization. The descriptive qualitative approach based on case studies and complemented by triangulation of methods and sources allows for in-depth exploration of meaning and is both academically and practically relevant.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1. Strategy and Representation of Islam Nusantara as Soft Power Theory in Practice**

*Islam Nusantara*—Indonesia's distinctive Islamic paradigm—embodies a syncretic, pacifist interpretation of Islam rooted in localized cultural traditions, positioning it as a paradigmatic model of moderate Islam in global cultural diplomacy. Amid rising transnational extremism and Islamophobic discourse, this framework advances values of *rahmah* (compassion), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *tawazun* (balance), functioning as a soft power mechanism that simultaneously reinforces Indonesia's identity as a pluralistic Muslim-majority democracy (Nubowo, 2023).

Emerging from centuries of Islam-cultural acculturation, *Islam Nusantara* synthesizes indigenous sociocultural norms—such as *gotong royong* (communal cooperation), ancestral veneration, and collectivist ethics—with universal Islamic principles (Safei, 2021). Ritual practices like *tahlilan* (collective prayer), *shalawatan* (devotional chants), and *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) exemplify this synthesis, serving as cultural diplomacy tools that demonstrate Islam's adaptability to localized contexts without erasing preexisting traditions (Roszi & Mutia, 2018). Such acculturative processes, as Junaid (2013) notes, foster dynamic intercultural dialogues that preserve autochthonous wisdom while facilitating doctrinal harmonization.

Strategically, *Islam Nusantara* counters radicalization by promoting non-violent, humanist interpretations of Islam. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, institutionalizes this through *pesantren* curricula emphasizing civic pluralism, anti-extremism, and nationalist loyalty—directly contesting puritanical ideologies like Wahhabism (Subhani et al.,

2018). This pedagogical approach positions NU not merely as a cultural custodian but as a bulwark against transnational radical networks.

In public diplomacy, NU leverages *Islam Nusantara*'s pacifist ethos through multilateral platforms such as the Religion of Twenty (R20) forum. By prioritizing cultural narratives over ideological polemics, NU exemplifies soft power diplomacy, aligning with Dorigné-Thomson (2023) analysis of religion as a non-state vector for Indonesia's global influence. This strategy underscores *Islam Nusantara*'s dual role: preserving domestic social cohesion while projecting Indonesia as an architect of civilizational dialogue.

The cultural diplomacy initiatives spearheaded by Nahdlatul Ulama's international chapters (PCINU) exemplify *Islam Nusantara*'s operationalization as a soft power instrument. In Japan and Australia, commemorative events such as *haul* (annual memorials for Gus Dur), *shalawatan* (devotional chants), and interfaith dialogues transcend ritualistic functions to showcase Indonesia's tradition of pluralistic Islam. These platforms, characterized by non-confrontational engagement, foster intercultural dialogue while reshaping global perceptions of Islam as a spiritually anchored, culturally adaptive force (Wahyudi, 2022). Such programming demonstrates how faith-based cultural practices can deconstruct monolithic stereotypes of Islam, repositioning it as a facilitator of cross-civilizational understanding.

*Islam Nusantara*'s significance extends beyond cultural representation to embody a political epistemology: its synthesis of Islamic principles with democratic pluralism counters narratives equating Islam with authoritarianism. Through aesthetic, linguistic, and pedagogical channels, this paradigm advances Indonesia's image as a democratic Muslim-majority state capable of harmonizing religious identity with civic nationalism. Nubowo (2023). conceptualizes this as "autonomous soft power," wherein NU operates as a non-state diplomatic actor whose cultural legitimacy enhances Indonesia's international standing without direct governmental orchestration.

This strategic approach redefines power dynamics in global Islamic discourse, privileging cultural affinity over coercive dominance. By institutionalizing *rahmah* (compassion)-centric values, agrarian-rooted traditions, and deradicalization methodologies, *Islam Nusantara* models how normative influence can emerge through shared ethical frameworks rather than ideological imposition. Consequently, Indonesia's foreign policy architecture must systematically integrate these principles, leveraging NU's transnational networks to position *Islam Nusantara* as a cornerstone of the nation's soft power portfolio. Such integration would amplify Indonesia's role as a mediator in civilizational dialogues, bridging Muslim-majority societies and the Global North through culturally resonant diplomacy.

### 3.2. NU Cultural Assets in Diplomacy

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) wields its distinctive religious-cultural practices as strategic assets in Indonesia's cultural diplomacy, leveraging rituals such as *tahlil* (communal prayers), *shalawatan* (devotional chants), *haul* (commemorative events for Islamic scholars), and *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) traditions. These practices transcend ritualistic functions to embody the archipelago's Islamic identity—characterized by collectivism, spiritual pacifism, and cultural hybridity. By reframing these traditions as intangible cultural heritage, NU projects Indonesian Islam as a counter-narrative to puritanical interpretations, emphasizing adaptability over doctrinal rigidity (Luthfi, 2016).

NU operationalizes this cultural capital through soft diplomacy mechanisms in international forums. The *Haul Gus Dur* commemorations organized by its diasporic branches (PCINU) in Australia and the Netherlands exemplify this approach, attracting interfaith and multicultural participation. These events showcase NU's doctrinal universalism through performative elements like *shalawatan*—blending Arabic liturgical texts with Javanese and Indonesian musical aesthetics—thereby fostering cross-cultural affinity through emotive resonance rather than ideological persuasion (Ernada, 2023). This methodology aligns with UNESCO's emphasis on cultural expressions as vehicles for intercultural dialogue.

Central to NU's diplomatic efficacy is its transnational organizational infrastructure, with PCINU networks spanning 28 countries functioning as non-state diplomatic agents. These nodes facilitate multifocal engagement through theological workshops, multilingual publications on moderate Islam, and community-driven interfaith initiatives. Their grassroots diplomacy complements state efforts by normalizing *Islam Nusantara* principles in quotidian cross-cultural interactions, thereby expanding Indonesia's influence beyond formal diplomatic channels. This decentralized model exemplifies “track two” diplomacy, where non-state actors cultivate transnational trust through sustained cultural engagement.

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) derives its diplomatic efficacy from synthesizing symbolic authority with culturally grounded praxis. The *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) system exemplifies this duality, functioning not merely as an educational institution but as a crucible for regenerating moderate Islamic values. Alumni who assume leadership roles in NU's international chapters (PCINU) operationalize principles such as *tasamuh* (interfaith tolerance), *tawazun* (sociopolitical balance), and *tawassuth* (doctrinal moderation) within transnational contexts. Thus, *pesantren* serve as nodal points for disseminating Indonesia's cultural diplomacy ethos through diasporic networks, transforming localized values into global social capital.

NU's participation in multilateral platforms like the Religion of Twenty (R20) and International Ulama Conference underscores its emergence as a non-state architect of global Islamic discourse. At R20, NU spearheaded interfaith dialogues engaging diverse religious leaders, strategically positioning *Islam Nusantara* as a conflict-resolution paradigm rather than a parochial tradition. This framing, codified in the R20 outcome document's assertion that *Islam Nusantara* constitutes “spiritual capital for global peace,” elevates Indonesia's status as an epistemic authority on moderate Islam (R20 Secretariat, 2022). Such initiatives redefine Islamic diplomacy by privileging cultural legitimacy over geopolitical posturing.

Leveraging its transnational diaspora networks and ritual-cultural assets, NU has pioneered an inclusive model of track-two diplomacy rooted in communal agency rather than state coercion. This approach—predicated on shared ethical frameworks, grassroots cultural exchanges, and open intellectual engagement—demonstrates how religious diplomacy can transcend formal state channels to foster intercultural trust. For Indonesia to optimize its soft power potential, policymakers must institutionalize NU's cultural capital—*pesantren* pedagogies, ritual practices, and multilateral forum participation—as pillars of a foreign policy strategy that harmonizes national interests with civilizational dialogue.

### 3.3. *Diplomacy Expression of Islam Nusantara*

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) exemplifies novel dynamics in Indonesian cultural diplomacy through its non-state diplomatic praxis via the PCINU diaspora network. Distinct from state-



centric Track One diplomacy, NU operationalizes Track Two Diplomacy—leveraging grassroots religious networks to disseminate *Islam Nusantara* principles through cultural symbolism, communal practices, and value-based engagement. This approach positions NU as a transnational ambassador of Indonesia's Islamic identity, prioritizing organic cultural diffusion over institutional policymaking (Zidni, 2023).

PCINU's programming illustrates this paradigm, notably through initiatives like *Harmony in Differences* in the Netherlands. This intercultural forum counters Islamophobic narratives by reframing Indonesian Islam as a pluralism-compatible tradition, emphasizing its congruence with multicultural coexistence. By foregrounding ritual practices (e.g., interfaith *shalawatan* recitations) alongside academic dialogues, PCINU fosters affective connections that formal diplomacy often struggles to achieve, thereby repositioning Islam as a unifier in polarized societies (Munasir et al., 2024).

In China, PCINU bridges Indonesia's Muslim diaspora with Hui Muslim communities through educational exchanges and cultural seminars. These initiatives contextualize *Islam Nusantara* as a non-fundamentalist, culturally adaptive tradition, mitigating geopolitical tensions exacerbated by global Islamophobia. Sadjidah (2024) ethnographic studies reveal how such engagements enhance Indonesia's image as a moderate Muslim-majority democracy, underscoring NU's role in decoupling Islamic identity from radicalized stereotypes. By privileging cultural affinity over ideological proselytization, NU's diplomacy cultivates transnational trust—a prerequisite for sustainable inter-civilizational dialogue.

The diplomatic paradigm of *Islam Nusantara* manifests through cross-cultural leadership exchanges facilitated by Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) global networks. In Australia, PCINU's *Interfaith Leadership Exchange* program epitomizes this approach, convening Indonesian Muslim scholars with Australian Christian and Jewish leaders to co-create frameworks for interreligious solidarity. This initiative operationalizes *Islam Nusantara*'s ethos by substituting doctrinal debates with cooperative social action—such as joint community welfare projects—thereby reframing Islam as a collaborative civilizational force. Beyond fostering interfaith trust, such programs amplify Indonesia's normative influence in multilateral religious governance, positioning NU not as a proselytizing entity but as an architect of cross-confessional peacebuilding.

NU's strategy aligns with Joseph Nye's soft power theory, wherein cultural legitimacy and value-based appeal supersede coercive statecraft. By leveraging *pesantren*-forged values of pluralism and communal ethics, NU demonstrates how socio-religious movements can recalibrate global Islamic discourse away from conflict-centric narratives (Rohman et al., 2020). In contrast to transnational Islamist movements that weaponize religious identity, *Islam Nusantara*'s soft diplomacy offers a counter-model—one that repositions Islamic civilizational identity as a harmonizing force in multicultural societies.

This innovative diplomatic praxis underscores Indonesia's potential to pioneer a civil society-driven foreign policy model. By institutionalizing NU's grassroots networks and ritual-cultural assets, the state could cultivate participatory diplomacy resistant to geopolitical volatility—a critical imperative in an era of weaponized identity politics. Such an approach would align with ASEAN's community-building principles while advancing Indonesia's bid to lead Global South narratives on religious modernity.

### 3.4. *Soft Power Theory (Joseph Nye) in Practice*

The study reveals that *Islam Nusantara*, as advanced by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) through its international chapters (PCINU), operationalizes Joseph Nye's soft power theory within non-state diplomatic frameworks. Empirical evidence—drawn from participatory observations of cultural initiatives and semi-structured interviews with PCINU administrators in Japan and Australia—demonstrates NU's reliance on cultural affinity, inclusive liturgical practices, and values-based engagement over ideological coercion or political pressure (Nye, 20019).

Three thematic pillars emerged from cross-national data analysis: (1) cultural symbolism as soft power instrumentation, (2) narrative consistency in Islamic moderation, and (3) relational diplomacy anchored in communal agency. For instance, PCINU Japan's commemoration of *haul* (annual memorial) for KH. Hasyim Asy'ari integrated traditional *shalawatan* recitations with Japanese artistic elements, reframing the event as a transcultural peacebuilding platform. As articulated in a PCINU Japan statement (Nu Online, 2023):

“We present NU traditions without hierarchical judgment of other faiths. This transcends conventional proselytization, prioritizing empathetic cultural exchange.”

Findings underscore that *Islam Nusantara*'s soft power efficacy derives from performative cultural capital—rituals like *tahlil* (collective prayers) and vernacular-language *shalawat* (e.g., Javanese lyrical adaptations) foster emotive intercultural bonds. In Australia, PCINU's interfaith forums with Christian and Buddhist communities exemplify “track three” diplomacy, extending influence into civil society through trust-based collaboration.

Documented case studies confirm NU's non-state diplomatic model aligns with Nye's axiom: “the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion” (Nye, 2019). By eschewing state-centric paraphernalia, *Islam Nusantara* cultivates asymmetrical soft power—leveraging grassroots cultural legitimacy to recalibrate global perceptions of Islam. This paradigm underscores how values-driven, community-rooted diplomacy can achieve strategic influence absent institutional hegemony.

The findings demonstrate that *Islam Nusantara* has evolved from a localized discourse into a potent instrument of non-state diplomacy on the global stage. Aligning with Joseph Nye's soft power framework (2004), NU exemplifies how civil society actors—when equipped with coherent narratives and distinct cultural capital—can exert strategic influence in international relations without formal state alignment. Core values such as *rahmah* (compassion), *ukhuwah insaniyah* (human solidarity), and *wasathiyah* (moderation) enable *Islam Nusantara* to resonate within pluralistic societies, fostering cross-cultural acceptance (Ab Rashid et al., 2020).

These results corroborate Nubowo's (2023) assertion that NU diplomacy serves as Indonesia's “strategic narrative” abroad. However, diverging from studies focused solely on symbolic dimensions, this research highlights *Islam Nusantara*'s efficacy in grounded, culturally adaptive social practices. This constitutes a theoretical advancement, illustrating soft power as a dynamic construct capable of creative reinterpretation by non-state actors (Nubowo, 2023).

Concurrently, the study critiques structural gaps in Indonesian diplomacy. The absence of institutional support and resource allocation for NU's initiatives reveals a misalignment between national policy and grassroots potential. Despite this, *Islam Nusantara*'s inclusive, humanist ethos has garnered global traction, underscoring the imperative for systemic integration of cultural assets into foreign policy architectures.

Practical Implications: (1) Formalized partnerships between NU and the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs via culture-driven public diplomacy platforms. (2) Capacity-building programs (e.g., cultural diplomacy training) for PCINU administrators to enhance their efficacy as *Islam Nusantara* ambassadors.

The findings broaden soft power paradigms by positioning religious civil society entities—particularly NU—as proactive agents in diplomatic arenas. Unlike Saudi Arabia or Iran’s ideologically driven influence, Indonesia’s model prioritizes empathetic cultural engagement, offering *Islam Nusantara* as a counter-narrative to hegemonic discourses. NU thus transcends conventional religious roles, emerging as a producer of globally competitive values that redefine power in intercultural contexts.

### 3.5. *Comparison with Other Muslim Diplomacies*

Indonesia’s religious diplomacy, operationalized through Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and its *Islam Nusantara* paradigm, diverges fundamentally from the state-centric Islamic diplomacy models of Saudi Arabia and Iran. While all three nations instrumentalize Islam as a strategic foreign policy tool, their approaches reflect divergent ideological orientations: Saudi Arabia prioritizes the global propagation of Wahhabism, Iran advances revolutionary Shiite theology, and Indonesia leverages cultural diplomacy rooted in *Islam Nusantara*’s syncretic ethos (Khamdan & Wiharyani, 2018).

Saudi Arabia has institutionalized Wahhabi ideological expansion as a cornerstone of its foreign policy since the mid-20th century. Backed by hydrocarbon revenues, this state-centric, top-down model manifests through mosque construction subsidies, transnational dissemination of Wahhabi literature, and scholarships to Islamic universities in Medina and Riyadh. However, its doctrinally rigid theological framework often clashes with pluralistic societies, as noted by a PCINU Japan representative:

“While Saudi institutions donate religious texts here, Japan’s multicultural context resonates more with NU’s flexible, peace-oriented engagement” (Islamic Da’wah in Japan, 2024).

Conversely, Iran’s religious diplomacy, anchored in post-1979 revolutionary Shiism, merges theological imperatives with anti-Western political agendas. Through media networks, educational institutions, and support for Shiite minorities, Tehran promotes a “resistance theology” that galvanizes solidarity in conflict zones like Iraq and Yemen. Yet, this exclusionary strategy exacerbates sectarian tensions in religiously diverse societies, reinforcing perceptions of Iranian diplomacy as militant and divisive (Inoguchi, 2019).

In contrast, Indonesia’s *Islam Nusantara*—disseminated via NU’s grassroots networks—embodies a soft power approach that harmonizes Islamic principles with local cultural norms. This model eschews ideological rigidity, instead prioritizing intercultural dialogue and adaptive social practices, thereby offering a replicable framework for religious diplomacy in pluralistic contexts.

Nahdlatul Ulama’s (NU) diplomatic model has garnered cross-cultural resonance, particularly in pluralistic societies such as Australia, the Netherlands, and Japan. In Australia, PCINU’s annual *haul* (memorial) commemorations for Gus Dur—involving interfaith leaders and cultural figures—have garnered national media coverage while reframing Islamic traditions as platforms for multicultural solidarity. Similarly, PCINU Netherlands bridges Indonesian-Muslim diasporic communities with Dutch society through initiatives like the *Nusantara Islamic Art*

*Festival*, which harmonizes traditional *shalawatan* recitations with contemporary European artistic expressions. In Japan, NU's cultural diplomacy—manifested in interfaith dialogues and *wayang*-inspired theatrical performances—operationalizes Islamic moderation through locally resonant formats. These cases affirm NU's success in positioning *Islam Nusantara* as a syncretic paradigm that complements, rather than contests, host societies' cultural norms (Nubowo, 2023).

Theoretically, NU's approach expands soft power frameworks by centering religious civil society as a non-state actor in global governance. Contrasting Saudi Arabia's state-driven Wahhabi proselytization and Iran's revolutionary Shiite theologization, NU demonstrates how grassroots networks, narrative consistency, and intangible cultural heritage can rival institutionalized ideological campaigns. This aligns with emerging scholarship on multitrack diplomacy, which underscores the strategic agency of non-state actors—religious bodies, diasporas, and educational institutions—in shaping transnational perceptions and policy landscapes (Melissen, 2011). NU's model thus redefines power dynamics in international relations, privileging cultural legitimacy over coercive ideologization.

These findings hold critical implications for Indonesia's global diplomatic positioning. By institutionalizing *Islam Nusantara* as a cultural soft power asset, Indonesia can consolidate its role as an epistemic authority on moderate Islam while asserting the global relevance of indigenous values. To optimize this potential, structured state-civil society collaboration is imperative—integrating NU's grassroots networks into a cohesive public diplomacy strategy that synergizes cultural programming, policy advocacy, and cross-sectoral partnerships. Such a framework would not only amplify Indonesia's normative influence but also establish a replicable model for pluralistic societies navigating civilizational dialogues in an era of polarized identity politics.

### 3.6. Challenges and Opportunities for Nusantara Islamic Diplomacy in the Global Era

The *Islam Nusantara* diplomacy model advanced by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) through its PCINU diaspora network has emerged as Indonesia's preeminent non-state cultural diplomacy framework. By foregrounding values such as *rahmah* (compassion), *tawasuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *ukhuwah insaniyah* (universal solidarity), NU positions this paradigm as a faith-based soft power instrument uniquely suited to address global identity-based tensions. However, its efficacy faces two systemic challenges: intra-Muslim ideological fragmentation in Indonesia and the hegemony of radical Islamic narratives in digital spaces.

NU's diplomatic narrative is undermined by ideological dissonance within Indonesia's Muslim community. The tripartite division between NU's moderate traditionalism, conservative Islamist groups, and Saudi-influenced puritanical movements (Safei, 2021), creates representational ambiguities in international forums. Critics, as noted by Ma'arif (2021), mischaracterize *Islam Nusantara* as syncretic heresy or covert secularization, particularly among factions privileging Arab-centric Salafist orthodoxy. This internal contestation erodes the paradigm's legitimacy as a unified diplomatic narrative for Indonesian Islam (Mas'ud et al., 2018).

Transnational hardline groups dominate digital discourse through algorithmically amplified, emotionally charged content that weaponizes apocalyptic imagery and sectarian binaries. In contrast, NU's contemplative, contextually grounded narratives remain marginalized on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok due to underdeveloped digital branding and inconsistent multilingual outreach (Wahyudi, 2022). This creates a paradox: while *Islam*

*Nusantara* gains traction in grassroots intercultural practices, its digital invisibility cedes perceptual dominance to conflict-oriented ideologies.

This dichotomy between operational efficacy and digital marginalization underscores the urgency for NU to recalibrate its strategy. Bridging this gap requires: (1) Intellectual Consolidation: Resolving internal theological disputes through scholarly dialogues affirming *Islam Nusantara*'s orthodoxy within Sunni tradition. (2) Digital Repositioning: Partnering with tech firms and creative agencies to produce visually compelling, algorithm-optimized content that reframes moderation as countercultural resistance.

NU's experience highlights a broader lesson for faith-based soft power: cultural diplomacy must now operate simultaneously in physical and virtual arenas to counterbalance the weaponization of digital spaces by exclusionary actors.

While challenges persist, strategic opportunities exist to amplify *Islam Nusantara*'s diplomatic efficacy. Foremost among these is NU's transnational infrastructure, with PCINU chapters across 28 countries serving as dynamic conduits for Indonesia's moderate Islamic values. Through culturally adaptive methodologies—ranging from commemorative *haul* events honoring NU luminaries to interfaith art exhibitions—PCINU fosters intercultural trust and social cohesion. Its grassroots, non-confrontational approach often garners greater receptivity than state-aligned or ideologically rigid transnational Islamic organizations, particularly in pluralistic societies.

Empirical studies underscore *Islam Nusantara*'s alignment with multicultural governance paradigms. Sadjidah (2024) comparative analysis reveals that its emphasis on coexistence resonates with Australia's social harmony policies, the Netherlands' intercultural dialogue frameworks, and Japan's "soft power through *wa* (harmony)" strategy. Illustratively, PCINU Australia's Gus Dur *haul* commemorations—attended by interfaith leaders and covered by mainstream media like The Sydney Morning Herald—demonstrate the paradigm's capacity to reframe Islamic identity as a unifier in secular democracies. Similarly, PCINU Japan's adaptation of *pengajian* (Islamic study sessions) into *zadankai* (roundtable discussions) exemplifies culturally sensitive norm localization.

This receptivity positions *Islam Nusantara* as a counter-model to the transnational ideologization pursued by Saudi Arabia and Iran. Unlike their state-driven, doctrine-centric approaches, NU's diplomacy prioritizes emotive intercultural bonds over doctrinal hegemony, as Nubowo (2023) conceptualizes through the lens of "affective soft power." To institutionalize this advantage, a tripartite strategy is imperative:

Policy Recommendations: (1) Synergistic Governance: Formalize NU-Ministry of Foreign Affairs collaboration through a Joint Task Force on Cultural Diplomacy, integrating PCINU networks into Indonesia's soft power architecture. (2) Digital Recalibration: Develop algorithm-responsive multimedia content (e.g., TikTok *shalawat* remixes, YouTube documentaries on NU's deradicalization programs) to counter extremist narratives. (3) Capacity Building: Institute certification programs for PCINU administrators in intercultural communication and digital storytelling, leveraging partnerships with institutions like UIN Jakarta and Erasmus University.

By bridging cultural praxis with strategic digital engagement, *Islam Nusantara* can transition from a localized tradition to a globally competitive diplomatic narrative—one that redefines religious soft power as a catalyst for civilizational dialogue rather than ideological contestation.



## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) *Islam Nusantara* diplomacy, operationalized through its global PCINU networks, embodies Indonesia's soft power anchored in cultural legitimacy and faith-based pluralism. Distinct from Saudi Arabia's state-centric Wahhabi ideologization or Iran's revolutionary Shiite theologization, NU prioritizes horizontal grassroots engagement, intercultural dialogue, and non-confrontational Islamic representation. These findings solidify NU's role as a pivotal non-state actor in contemporary public diplomacy, demonstrating how religious civil societies can recalibrate global power dynamics through normative cultural capital.

Empirically, NU's strategy proves effective in cultivating cross-cultural affinity, particularly via rituals like *haul* (scholar commemorations), hybrid *shalawatan* performances, and interfaith forums. Its success in pluralistic societies—evidenced by PCINU Australia's media-acclaimed Gus Dur memorials and PCINU Japan's culturally adapted *pengajian* (Islamic study sessions)—highlights *Islam Nusantara*'s viability as a counter-narrative to radicalized global Islamic discourses. By privileging adaptive cultural practices over doctrinal rigidity, NU reframes Islamic identity as a harmonizing force in multicultural contexts.

Nevertheless, systemic challenges persist. Internally, intra-Muslim ideological dissonance—particularly between traditionalist, Islamist, and Salafist factions—undermines the coherence of Indonesia's Islamic diplomatic narrative. Externally, NU struggles against asymmetrical digital narrative warfare, where algorithmically amplified extremist content overshadows its contemplative, peace-oriented messaging. Compounding these issues is the absence of institutionalized collaboration between NU and Indonesia's foreign policy apparatus, hindering the strategic scaling of its grassroots diplomacy.

To optimize this potential, the study advocates for formalized state-civil society synergies, integrating NU's cultural assets into Indonesia's foreign policy architecture through multitrack diplomacy frameworks. Theoretically, these findings expand soft power paradigms by positioning religious civil societies as key agents in global norm-shaping, challenging Westphalian state-centric models. *Islam Nusantara* thus transcends its origins as a localized tradition, emerging as a transnational blueprint for reconciling civilizational identity with pluralistic coexistence—a critical imperative in an era of polarized globalization.

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